

Distracted driving leads to thousands of car crashes in Alabama yearly

By Katherine Sayre



Phyllis and Norman Bragg pose with a photograph of their late daughter, Chelsea Ann Bragg, who was 16 in 2006 when she died in a car crash attributed to distracted driving. (Press-Register/John David Mercer)

DAPHNE, Alabama — Hackers had invaded U.S. Sports Academy's computer system, and her big brother would have to work all night. Chelsea Bragg, 16, called her dad that afternoon to ask where the sleeping bags were in their house — their final conversation.

She and a friend hopped in Chelsea's Oldsmobile on a mission to take her brother, a network administrator, some supplies for his long night ahead.

On the way, she grabbed her friend's cell phone and began writing a text message, drifted off the roadway, then jerked the wheel back. Within seconds, her car flipped and rolled down the highway.

"There was a life before the accident, and there is a life after the accident," said her father, Norman Bragg. "You go through the motions and you do things, but there's never that same enjoyment I had in life like I had before."

In Alabama last year, an estimated 14,000 car crashes — about one in nine of all roadway accidents — involved distracted driving, such as talking on a cell phone, eating, texting or toying with the navigation system.

In those crashes, 132 people died and 4,380 others were injured, according to estimates by the University of Alabama's Center for Advanced Public Safety based on federal data.

The most dangerous distraction is text messaging because it involves three kinds of driver error: taking your eyes off the road, your hands off the wheel and your mind off what you're doing, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The highest rate of fatal crashes falls to teen drivers.

Last year, Daphne became the first city in coastal Alabama to ban texting while driving. Others have since joined the group: Chickasaw, Fairhope and Spanish Fort.

State lawmakers considered a similar ban, although the bill died with the close of the session a few weeks ago. The Mobile City Council shelved a proposed ban last month.

Risk takers

Norman and Phyllis Bragg live in a yellow, two-story house with a wide porch and an American flag hanging from a post. Their subdivision off U.S. 90 is less than five miles from where their daughter died.

As their two kids grew up, Norman Bragg said, the issue of safety was pervasive in their lives. He is chief of safety and occupational health for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Mobile. He even brought home vehicle seat belt demonstrations to emphasize the need. On the day of the crash, he learned a cruel fact: Chelsea hadn't buckled her seat belt. Her friend, who escaped alive, had put hers on.

"I always worried the most about my son, instead of my daughter, because, guys — you think of them as risk-takers," Bragg said.

Facts about distracted driving

- Four out of five teens ages 16 and 17 own cell phones and more than three-fourths of them use text messaging. One in four says he or she has texted while driving.
- Drivers who use hand-held devices are four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves.
- Using a cell phone while driving, whether it's hand-held or hands-free, delays a driver's reactions as much as having a blood alcohol concentration at the legal limit of .08 percent.

- According to a 2009 estimate, there are about 636,000 crashes across the U.S. attributable to cell phone use each year.
- One-fifth of all crashes with injuries in 2009 were related to some kind of distracted driving.
- In a survey of nearly 2,000 teens, 86 percent admitted to driving while distracted, even though 84 percent said they knew of the dangers. More than one-third said they had been involved in a near-crash caused by distracted driving.

Sources: Pew Research Center, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, University of Utah, National Safety Council, Seventeen magazine.

As a sophomore at Daphne High, Chelsea had an outsized personality. She danced and tried out for the cheerleading squad. She acted in plays including "Oklahoma" and dressed as a zombie in a production of "Night of the Living Dead."

Her parents said that she was a smart, witty girl who liked to be the center of attention. Dozens of photos collected for her funeral show her wearing funky glasses, dancing and goofing around with friends.

She got into little mischief as a teen, although she once put soap in a park fountain to make it foam, her parents said.

She and her friends invented "squirrel fishing" using nuts on fishing lines to briefly capture the hungry scavengers. Her parents still laugh at the story.

The Braggs were living in Tokyo with their son when Phyllis learned she would be having the baby girl she had long wanted.

In 1989, she traveled back to the U.S. to give birth to Chelsea "so she could be president if she wanted to," she said.

A different world for driving

Sixteen years later, her parents bought her a car for her birthday. Chelsea opened a gift to find a keychain bearing her initials, then looked outside to see the Oldsmobile parked in the front yard with a big, red bow on top.

In the moments before she died on May 3, 2006, Chelsea was driving westward on U.S. 90, approaching the Jubilee Square Shopping Center. It's not clear who she was texting on her friend's cell phone, or why.

Veering off the road, she pulled her steering wheel back to the left, police said, which caused her car to "roll violently" along the highway before coming to a stop upright.

Chelsea's friend who survived didn't want to be interviewed by the Press-Register as she tries to move on with her life.

Today, Chelsea would be 21 years old. Her parents said they have leaned on each other to make it through the past five years of tumult and grief.

Her father said he wishes he'd been more harsh and taken away the keys when he caught his daughter pulling out of the driveway without her seat belt on or using her phone.

He urged other parents to take more strict action when they catch their teens bending the rules.

"They're 16 and invincible," he said. "They drive fast and turn up their radio, talk to their friends ... and do all the same things I did. You feel like 'I made it, I don't know why they won't.' It's just a different world out there for driving now."

Laws banning texting while driving, he said, will prove difficult to enforce.

At Chelsea's funeral in a Fairhope church, Norman Bragg read a eulogy for his daughter:

"One inch more or one inch less and we would not be here," he said. "The same inches and seconds that caused that accident are those same inches and seconds that make up life.

Chelsea filled each inch and second with passion, excitement and love ... and now it's time to say goodbye to time and distance for Chelsea."